FEATURE
Saving the Chesapeake
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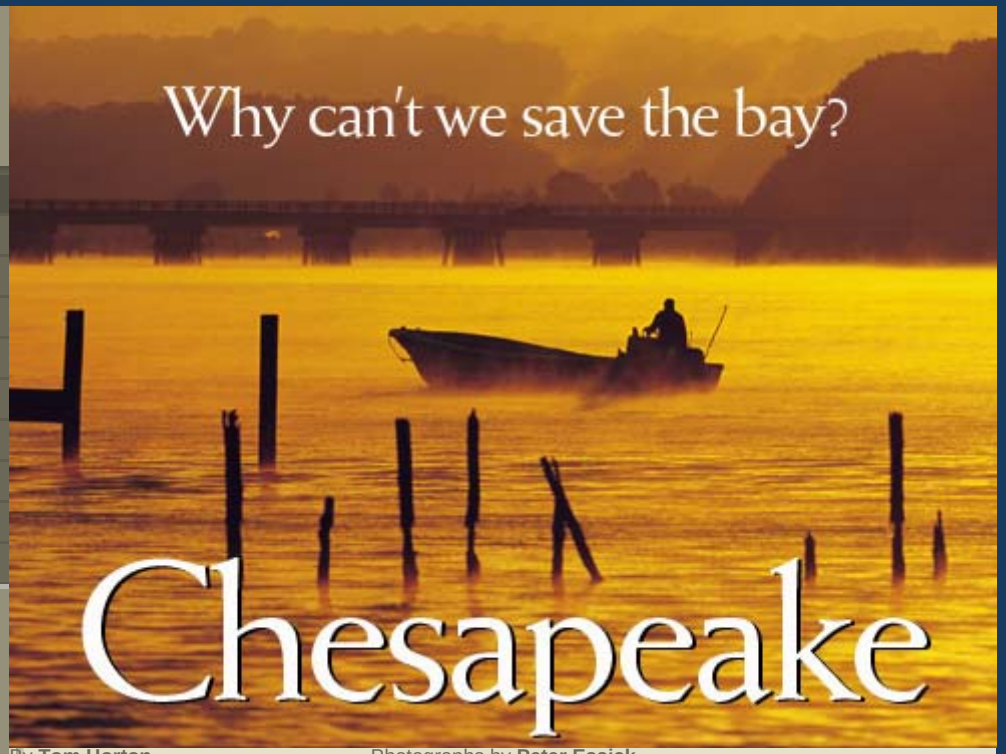

By **Tom Horton** Photographs by **Peter Essick**

Conservationists know what's wrong with the bay and how to fix it. They also know why it won't happen soon.

Get a taste of what awaits you in print from this compelling excerpt.

It's a moonless February evening, heavy sleet and snow on the way, winds 15 knots and gusting, building a sharp chop on Chesapeake Bay. "Looks good to go," says my friend Don Baugh, meaning it's time to pull on fleece insulation and dry suits, and kayak for an hour to our roost for this long winter's night. We're headed for an uninhabited dab of marsh and dune, miles from the nearest mainland, with just enough lee from the oncoming blow to shelter a campfire. Waves slap a glaze of ice on our foredecks as we paddle through the splash and black.

Soon, under a tarp staked in the wind shadow of a dune, we've got chunks of glowing oak, stashed in balmier times, throwing off luxurious heat, popping open fat, locally tonged oysters on a grate. The evening's musical entertainment features a nearby band of wintering tundra swans, flown in from Alaska's North Slope. Sleet rattles the tarp as the storm blots the lights of fishing villages that sparkle from the mainland.

There are comfier ways to experience Chesapeake Bay, but no truer ones for us. In the nighttime, in wintertime, we find refuge and renewal in these shrinking vestiges of the wilder Chesapeake we knew many years ago. It was much easier then to lose oneself in the countless creeks and rivers that vein the tidal bay's more than 11,600 miles (18,700 kilometers) of coastline, to jump black ducks from the marshes, pluck soft crabs and oysters from the clear, grassy shallows, and float on waters not constantly churned by the wake of high-speed sport boats. So much has changed—oysters nearly gone, crabs near historic lows, waterman towns dying out, buildings and roads fracturing the countryside. Population in the estuary's watershed, which includes parts of six states and the District of Columbia, has doubled in our lifetime, from 8 million to 16 million, compromising solitude as well as water quality.

No one had illusions that the work of the Chesapeake Bay Program, a massive federal-state restoration effort, begun in 1983 and unmatched anywhere in the world, would be quick or easy. But no one anticipated that 22 years later we'd still be struggling. Chesapeake Bay is not alone. From the Gulf of Mexico to Europe's Baltic and North Seas, from Hong Kong to Chile to Australia, dozens of coastal regions are showing similar declines. Not one has yet fully recovered.

"If the richest, most powerful nation on Earth can't clean up this mess on the very doorstep of the nation's capital, what message do we send for the future of the planet?" asks William C. Baker, president of the nonprofit Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF). Founded in 1967, and one of the largest regional environmental groups in the U.S., CBF is the voice of the Chesapeake; in its latest ecological report card CBF gave Chesapeake Bay a failing grade of 27 out of 100.

It's a time of soul-searching for people like Baugh and me, who have dedicated our careers to reversing the decline—I as a journalist, he as an environmental educator. I've known the bay for six decades, through its health and decline, blithely gloried in it as a young hunter, fisherman, and marsh mucker; worried professionally about it for 30 years as an environmental writer for the Baltimore *Sun*; and written about it "hanging in the balance" 12 years ago in this magazine.

During the past year I've been traveling the approximately 200-mile-long (320-kilometer-long) estuary by kayak, skiff, and back road. Call it a farewell to old haunts, or maybe a search for hope. Or maybe it's the bay writer at 60 trying to come to terms with what was supposed to happen on his watch, but may not; may never.